**And again, the truth: There are no half a million people in the settlements**

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Since the establishment of the last Netanyahu government, and even more so since Trump was elected President of the United States, we are witnessing a flood of declarations regarding the lifting of all political restrictions and barriers to the development of the settlement enterprise in the West Bank. Ministers and MKs on the right, members of the Yesha Council and hilltop youths, celebrated the flourishing of the settlements and the irreversible facts on the ground. To complete the euphoria, they presented dozens of bills and plans for the annexation of parts of the West Bank, and even all of it. All allegedly. An imagined reality of their messianic-nationalist faith and an attempt to justify the huge budgets spilled there.

The illusions and deceptions of the public, like every year in recent years, are shattered on the rocks of the Central Bureau of Statistics publications. The number of Israelis in the Judea and Samaria region grew in 2017, as in any of the past five years, by 14,000 residents. From 3,99,043 at the end of 2016 to 413,400 at the end of 2017. Yes, not half a million and certainly not 800,000 Israelis are living in Judea and Samaria, as the representatives of the nationalist-messianic right-wing often claim misleadingly.   
Only 13 percent of the total population of the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem).

This figure is the "brightest" for the supporters of the settlement enterprise. The annual growth in Judea and Samaria, which is still higher than the average in Israel, continues to decline almost every year. More importantly, the migration balance in 2017 is the lowest since 2005, and stands at only 1,300. Yes, only thirteen hundred more chose to move from Israel to Judea and Samaria than those who chose to return to the sovereign borders of the State of Israel. This figure points to the trend of "voting with their feet" of Israelis in the past 20 years, despite all the benefits that the government has spent on the residents of the district. The "wave" of immigration of 800 people from abroad who came directly to the settlements did not improve this grim picture.

Thus, as in the last two decades, the source of growth is natural increase. This figure relates mainly to the ultra-Orthodox population, most of whom live in the two poorest cities in Israel - Modi'in Illit and Betar Illit. The two are located on the Green Line, are not identified with the ideology of the messianic right, and their residents crossed the Green Line only because of the housing shortage of the Haredi society in Jerusalem and Bnei Brak ("settlers against our will"). Their residents now account for 30 percent of the Jewish population living in the 127 settlements, most of which are isolated and small. This year, too, these two cities contributed almost half of the overall increase in the number of settlers (6,156).

As usual, most of the population (about 80 percent) is concentrated in the "first line" blocs and settlements, west of the route of the security fence. South of Gush Etzion, north of Alfei Menashe and east of Ma'aleh Adumim, the proportion of Israelis in the general population ranges from one percent in most of the area to 4 percent in its small area. Complete demographic and spatial Palestinian dominance that is interrupted by tiny and isolated settlements, illegal outposts, and primarily by IDF action that is required to protect them.

This is the fourth year in a row that the growth rate in isolated settlements has been declining, even though these are the homes of supporters of Greater Israel and of Gush Emunim throughout the generations, mostly "Jewish Home Party" voters. The settlement enterprise, which in it were invested hundreds of billions of shekels for five decades, was unable to achieve any Jewish dominance in space and demography except in the "blocs," which cover less than 5 percent of the West Bank.

Despite the facts of a small Jewish minority in the West Bank that demographically controls a few percent of the West Bank, one third of which are the poorest in Israel (cluster 1) with 71 percent below the median of the socio-economic index in Israel, the opponents of a final-status agreement continue to sanctify the imaginary "status quo." The illusion, which has not been realized for 50 years, that a transformation is nearing, does not stop harming Israel: the political stalemate that is deteriorating the status of the PLO, the Palestinian Authority and its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, may lead to the disintegration of the Palestinian Authority and to the return of responsibility for 2.6 million Palestinians to Israel, and the repeated rounds of violence with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which exact a heavy price from the communities surrounding the Gaza Strip and the south, from Israel's economy, the image of the IDF and Israel's standing in the world.

This severe failure does not discourage the followers of illusions, who continue to fight against a two-state for two peoples solution that is needed for the future of Israel and Palestine. Deep inside they are aware of the failure to establish irreversible facts on the ground and to prepare the necessary conditions for the annexation of Judea and Samaria without harming the Zionist vision. Therefore, we are witnessing attempts to make imaginary "profits" by annexing parts of Area C or all of them to Israel, and moving from a "creeping annexation" that has failed to annexation by a law that will further drive Israel into a one state that maintains an official apartheid regime or loses its Jewish character for an Arab majority.

The only chance of saving the Israeli settlement enterprise in the West Bank, while preserving the police and the identity of the State of Israel, is through a permanent agreement, even if it takes time to achieve it and gradually realize it. In any proposal for a permanent border, Israel will enjoy the preservation of 80 percent of the Israelis living beyond the Green Line under its sovereignty.

Indeed, for some Israelis, most of them belonging to the nationalist-messianic stream, it would be a bad ending, an evacuation and a severe faith crisis. Israel is better with a bad ending (that everything must be done in order to reduce it) to one percent of its population, than having a never-ending bad ending to all of its citizens.